



SPRING 2008 SPOTLIGHT:

Welcoming and Orienting Newcomer Students to U.S. Schools

Every time I opened my mouth they would start making fun of me. And the only thing I can do is just go to the restroom and cry. I was crying all day long, every day. Now I have friends and people actually think I'm popular. But actually, I'm the same person.
[4, Armenian youth]

Overview of School Adjustment

Today, nearly one-fifth of American students has immigrant parents, making this group the fastest-growing segment of the youth population.[19] Foreign-born students—and in particular, refugee students—may face challenges adapting academically to American schools, due to minimal formal education, interrupted schooling, and limited English. Beyond adapting academically, newcomer students also go through a period of cultural adjustment—adapting to American culture overall, as well as to the particular culture of their school; and social adjustment—attempting to make friends, and striving to belong in their new school, community, and country.

The individual experiences of foreign-born families as well as the characteristics and infrastructure of the receiving communities affect how well newcomer children adapt to their new schools—academically, culturally, and socially. This Spotlight will focus primarily on students' cultural and social adjustment, while recognizing the positive academic impact of successful socio-cultural adjustment. We examine the steps that teachers and administrators can take to integrate refugee children and youth into their schools, first looking at newcomer programs and other means of welcoming and accommodating foreign-born students, then discussing means of facilitating the social integration of newcomer students by teaching American-born students about refugee and immigrant populations, openly discussing racism, and preventing bullying.

For information and technical assistance on academic issues for newcomer students particularly English language learning see the [Spring Institute for Intercultural Learning](#) as well as the [Center for Applied Linguistics](#).

The Importance of Successful School Adjustment

Research indicates that positive school adjustment is important for a number of reasons, including the following:

- **Grades:** Research shows that immigrant students who have supportive school-based relationships with teachers and peers are more likely to engage in behaviors that are necessary to do well in school, such as attending class, completing school work, and doing homework. Furthermore, these researchers have demonstrated the significant impact that such behaviors have on immigrant students' grades.[19]
- **Graduation Rates:** Research indicates that immigrant students are far more likely to drop out of school than their nonimmigrant peers.[7] The factors contributing to the drop-out rate of immigrant students are complex; yet, one factor is the failure of many schools to effectively respond to newcomers' needs.[21]
- **Mental Health:** A recent study found a relationship between a sense of school-belonging and mental health among young refugees. The study found that a greater sense of school belonging among Somali refugee adolescents was associated with lower depression and higher self-efficacy, regardless of the level of past exposure to adversities.[10]
- **Child Welfare:** Several researchers point to the interrelationship between children's in-school experience and out-of-school well-being.[8] A positive school experience may be even more crucial

for newcomer youth, since schools are one of the most influential service systems in the lives of refugee and immigrant youth. Having a sense of community, which schools can provide, may be crucial to the well-being and integration of newcomer youth in the U.S.[1]

Orienting and Accommodating Newly-Arrived Refugee and Immigrant Students

The values here were so different from the ones I learned in Somalia. My first day of school, for instance, I was surprised to see the students not wearing uniforms. The students' attitudes toward the teachers were so different from what I was used to at home.[9]

Orientation for refugee and immigrant students helps to familiarize these newcomers with school routines and educational expectations. For example, newcomer students may need explanations related to:

- Sitting still for long periods of time
- Riding a school bus
- Physical exams and immunizations
- Attendance and report cards
- Wearing or not wearing a uniform
- Raising a hand to speak
- Lining up to leave the classroom
- Co-ed classes
- Using a locker
- Working independently and/or quietly
- Discipline in the school context
- Following a schedule and rotating classrooms or teachers
- Using a planner
- Changing clothes for gym in an open locker room
- How students and teachers relate to, and address, one another
- The roles of school personnel and who to go to with specific concerns
- Preparing for field trips
- What to do in emergency drills

Other aspects of cultural adjustment may be less obvious to teachers, such as students who may be unfamiliar with the freedom to make choices.[7] (For resources on orienting foreign-born students to the U.S. education system, see the text box at the bottom.)

Structuring Orientation

Some schools choose to orient newcomer students by explicitly teaching them concepts like those listed above. For example, the [Secondary Bilingual Orientation Center](#) in Seattle, Washington, conducts intakes for new students twice a week, which includes a tour and orientation to the school in their native language. At the beginning of every semester, there is an “orientation week,” during which teachers review their expectations for students for each subject taught. This includes topics such as how to use a planner, where to put your name on a paper, how to format homework, and so on.[13]

Programs such as this are often called “[newcomer programs](#)” described as “A program that, in a special academic environment for a limited period of time, educates recent immigrant students who have no or very limited English language proficiency and who may have had limited formal education in their native countries.” [18]

The number of newcomer programs has dramatically increased since 1990 due to more schools discovering that many English language learners have more specialized needs than traditional English as a second language (ESL) can accommodate. These programs are designed to develop students’ English language skills, but also to help orient them to U.S. schools, with programs varying significantly across the country. Some common features of newcomer programs include:

- Courses to orient students to U.S. schools and the community
- A program or set of courses distinct from the regular language support program

- A plan for English as a second language development
- Instructional strategies for literacy development
- Instructional strategies for the integration of language and content
- Paraprofessional support
- Strong parent and family involvement [17]
- Tutoring and other supports to bring students up to grade level.

It should be noted that some controversy exists regarding newcomer programs, since they involve separate classes for newly-arrived refugee and immigrant children. Some educators feel that newcomer programs may result in segregated classes that deliver substandard education.[6] Some areas of the country do offer foreign-born students the option of remaining in their newcomer program for many years. More research is needed on how extended newcomer programming ultimately affects societal integration. However, most newcomer programs are typically for about a year, and—if utilized correctly—help facilitate the integration of newcomer children into mainstream classrooms. In addition, some schools that are designed with refugee and immigrant children in mind, may also enroll or even recruit a certain amount of American-born children to attend. For example, read about one of this quarter's Promising Practices – the [International Community School in Georgia](#).

Newcomer programs are typically funded by a combination of [federal](#), state, and local monies. Federal funding may come from Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), which provides federal funding for high-poverty schools, or from Title III of ESEA, which allocates grants to states based on their share of the country's Limited English Proficient populations. In addition, the federal Office of Refugee Resettlement provides some funding for school integration and education activities through their [Refugee School Impact Program](#).

In 1996-2000, The Center for Research on Education, Diversity, and Excellence (CREDE) at the Center for Applied Linguistics carried out the only [comprehensive national study](#) of newcomer programs in the U.S. Though the CREDE study has ended, their [Directory of Secondary Newcomer Programs in the United States](#) continues to be available online. Teachers and administrators can search the database by school level, state, type of community, and more. Each entry includes contact information. For more information on newcomer programs, see [References and Resources Related to Newcomer Programs and Practices](#).

It is not always necessary to have a newcomer program to successfully orient newcomer children and youth to their schools. Some schools integrate cultural orientation into general instruction, such as Liberty High School in New York City. For example, teachers may guide a discussion on conflict resolution in a story from a student's culture and compare it with acceptable ways of resolving conflict in the U.S.[18] Other districts may use school-based counseling or support programs for refugee and immigrant youth to assist with the orientation and adjustment process. For example, [International Kid Success](#) in Denver, Colorado, assists newcomer children and youth in the adjustment to their new school, culture, and home in the U.S., as does [Cultural Adjustment and Trauma Services](#), a similar program run by the International Institute of New Jersey, in public two school districts.

The Social Integration of Newcomer Students into U.S. Schools

Besides culturally adjusting, foreign-born children go through a period of social adjustment, which can often be painful as the opening quote demonstrates. Some programs provide counseling for newcomer youth to help them adapt to their new school and country. Equally important, however, are programs that target American-born youth. The integration of refugee and immigrant families into American society is a two-way process, which not only involves the newcomer families, but also necessitates accommodation and flexibility on the part of the receiving society.

Opening the minds and hearts of American-born students to improve tolerance in U.S. schools and to create welcoming school environments free of xenophobia, racism, and bullying may be easier said than done. However, there are numerous materials available for teachers, guidance counselors, social workers, and administrators to tackle these sensitive topics.

Understanding Reasons for Immigrating

I remember in elementary school, this girl that I met said, "Go back where you came from." People don't understand that you would have to go back to a war zone or a refugee camp. Those comments are emotionally painful... We were the lucky ones to come to the U.S., and we expected Americans to know why we came, but they didn't know. [2, Afghan youth]

The current wave of newcomers to the U.S. is higher than at any other time in our country's history. Educators can play an important role in teaching students why families come to the U.S. Many newcomers have fled persecution in their home countries and have entered the U.S. legally through the [U.S. Refugee Admissions Program](#). However, few American students are likely to understand the varied motives and methods of those coming to the U.S. The materials listed below can help in teaching American-born students about refugees and immigrants.

Resources for Teaching about Refugees and Immigrants

- BRYCS has created Lists of Highlighted Resources on [Immigrant/Refugee Awareness Instructional Materials](#) and [Children's Books about the Immigrant/Refugee Experience](#).
- BRYCS' new [Youth Arts and Voices Web page](#) showcases the art work and poetry of refugee and immigrant youth in the U.S., giving American-born students a glimpse of the experiences of their newcomer peers.
- [Project REACH \(Refugee Education for Awareness, Change, and Hope\)](#) is a curriculum developed by ECDC/African Community Center of Denver, Colorado for this purpose.
- USA for United Nations High Commission for Refugees' (UNHCR) Web site includes a ["Teacher's Corner"](#) with resources for educators.

The Importance of World Geography

Sometimes people here can be annoying because they don't even know where Bosnia is. Or they ask me stupid questions like, "Do you have candy in Bosnia? Do you have houses?" Most American teenagers don't understand that we had absolutely the same life they do.[20]

As globalization and migration throughout the world continues, American students will continue to interface with students from around the globe. Some of the most frustrating, yet common, questions that foreign-born students receive relate to the location of their country or some aspect of how they lived there. Some newcomer students have reported being asked if they lived in trees, rode camels, and so on. Foreign-born students are often shocked to find out how little American students know about their countries of origin. Some general knowledge about a newcomer student's homeland can help refugee and immigrant youth feel more welcome. Furthermore, such general knowledge can also make American-born students more comfortable interacting with their newcomer peers.

Resources for Teaching Geography

- National Geographic Web pages on [education](#) and [geography](#), including lesson plans by grade, games for students, and more.
- [Education for Global Citizenship: A Guide for Schools](#)
- [Global Classroom Resource Center](#)

Ethnic & Racial Tensions

When I come nearby, people just look at me. I look odd. I feel shame and I don't like that. I'm so black. More than the black people who are living here. So I'm not even comparison to the black people that are the native of this land. The black people that are native of this land they are little bit browner than me but I'm so black. They wonder where this black person came from. [12, Sudanese youth]

Whether the receiving community is diverse or homogenous, race, ethnicity, and perceived differences can play a significant role in the social integration of newcomer youth. In less diverse communities, newcomer youth may feel uncomfortable—or exotic—such as the youth quoted above. Furthermore, teachers and administrators may struggle with addressing institutional racism at the school level.[11]

But even in diverse communities, having similar skin color, or a shared refugee experience, does not guarantee an affinity. Some schools report conflicts between American-born students of color and foreign-born students of color. One program noticed that African-American students were distancing themselves from African immigrants in order to maintain a certain image.[15] At the same time, African immigrants may choose to distance themselves from African-Americans and the perceived disadvantages of being Black in America.[16] Some schools experience tension between African-American and Latino students [14] while others report ethnic conflicts between groups of refugee and immigrant students. For example, a program coordinator in the Southwest reported tensions between Liberians and Somalis due to perceived differences in socioeconomic status and academic ability.[15]

Some educators suggest that the role of race in history and society must be acknowledged by individuals and institutions before racism can be overcome.[3] Teachers, administrators, counselors, and social workers can help to address ethnic tensions in their schools by responding to inappropriate comments made by students, as well as through group interventions, such as those initiated by the [International Kid Success](#) program in Denver, Colorado.

Although a delicate topic, often requiring training in order to address it comfortably and appropriately, resources exist to help educators address racism and bias head-on.

Resources for Addressing Ethnic and Racial Tensions in the Schools

- Tolerance.org, a project out of the Southern Poverty Law Center, includes a section of their Web site dedicated to teachers, called [Teaching Tolerance](#), which provides classroom activities, kits and handbooks, and funding opportunities for teachers and administrators addressing tolerance.
- [A World of Difference Institute](#), by the Anti-Defamation League, provides peer training using a unique combination of instructional and peer influence strategies to combat name-calling, bullying and harassment, and create safe and inclusive school communities.
- [Challenge Day](#) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit that provides one-day programs for students in middle, junior, and high schools to help create connections between students and to build empathy. The program is 6 1/2-hours and is designed for 100 students.
- The [Talking Race](#) Web site includes a "Tips for Teachers" section with definitions of common terms regarding race, and tips for cultivating classroom conversations.
- The film *Unity*, developed by the student-run "Unity Group" at [Roosevelt High School in Minneapolis, Minnesota](#), documents efforts to address tensions between Somali and African-American students by educating the student body about Somalia's civil war, the plight of African-Americans, and each group's background and culture.

Bullying

I started school fifteen days after I arrived in the U.S. One of the biggest problems I had was not knowing how to dress. In Russia, you pretty much wear what they give you. I didn't have any good clothes at all. All my clothes were totally out of style. People made fun of me but I had no idea why.[22]

Besides being harassed because of one's race or ethnicity, refugee and immigrant students are often teased for other reasons, such as their level of English, clothing, or other signs that they are new to the community or country. Newcomer students may be teased by American-born students, as well as by other immigrant and refugee students who have been in the U.S. for a longer period of time. For example, newly-arrived Asian students may be referred to by their acculturated peers with the taunt "FOBs"—a derogatory term meaning "fresh off the boat."^[5] Some adults see bullying as a normal experience that all kids go through, though others realize the unnecessary grief it causes.

Resources for Addressing Bullying in Schools

- The film [*Creating a Refuge from Bullying*](#), produced through Project REACH, mentioned above, discusses the bullying experiences of an Iraqi boy and a Somali Bantu girl.
- The Pacer Center's [National Center for Bullying Prevention](#) has handouts and Web pages in Hmong, Spanish, and/or Somali (see "Resources for Parents and Professionals" for handouts and links at page bottom for translated Web site content).
- Washington State's [Office of the Education Ombudsman](#) has resources in various languages, including a publication on "Bullying in School: What a Family Can Do" (available in English, Cambodian, Korean, Russian, Somali, Spanish and Vietnamese).
- Ontario, Canada's Ministry of Education has published, [Bullying: We Can All Help Stop It](#) available in 22 languages.
- The [United Kingdom's Department for Children, Schools and Families](#) created resources on bullying and cyberbullying, and created anti-bullying postcards for 12 different languages.
- The U.S. Health Resource and Service Administration created the [Stop Bullying Now](#) campaign, including information on bullying and youth-focused animated "webisode" stories.

Conclusion

Most refugee and immigrant families are deeply appreciative of the educational opportunities available in the United States. For some newcomer students, this appreciation is borne out of direct experience with the absence or interruption of schooling. Such experience often creates highly motivated learners who, if given the right tools and a welcoming environment, can progress academically and exceed expectations.

Teachers and administrators play a fundamental role in providing the right tools—through school orientation and integration programs; and creating a welcoming environment—by teaching American-born students about refugee and immigrant populations, openly discussing racism, and preventing bullying. Ultimately, the right tools and a welcoming environment can help all students learn better.

Resources for Orienting Foreign-Born Students to the U.S. Education System

Resources for Children & Youth:

- Two excellent resources for orienting refugee children and their families to the schools are the videos [*A New Day: Refugee Families in the United States*](#) and [*Be Who You Are: Refugee Youth in the United States*](#), produced by the [Center for Applied Linguistics \(CAL\)](#) with contributions by BRYCS. Topics addressed include family adjustment, discipline, school life, home life, and learning English. The videos portray students of all ages and various ethnic backgrounds getting ready for school, waiting for the bus, and spending time in academic, art, music, and gym classes.
- [*Sam's First Day*](#) follows a boy's first day of school through the eyes of Sam; available in 18 languages and in audio format.
- [*Anna Goes to School*](#) describes Anna's first day of school; available in 10 languages through [Open Communications, Inc.](#)
- [*Tom and Sofia Start School*](#) follows a school day through the eyes of two young children and includes diverse illustrations; available in 26 languages and in audio format (includes some British English).
- In [USCRI's](#) Somali Bantu Community Orientation manual contains a [Classroom Simulation](#) for teaching newcomer students about appropriate behavior in U.S. classrooms.

Resources for Parents & Youth:

- [*Involving Refugee Parents in their Children's Education*](#), see Box 6.
- [*Raising Children in a New Country: An Illustrated Handbook*](#), which includes some information related to U.S. schools.
- [*Educational Handbook for Refugee Parents*](#), from the [International Rescue Committee](#), uses clipart and simple language and is available in [Spanish](#), [French](#), [Burmese](#), and [Somali](#).
- [*Tukwila School District Parent Handbook*](#), created by the [International Rescue Committee -Seattle](#) in collaboration with the Tukwila School District in Washington State, includes photos and simple English to orient newcomer families to their local schools.

BRYCS' Spotlights and other publications are written for practitioners. All of the information and recommendations above are based on the references below. In places where there is not a specific reference listed and you would like to know the source, please [contact us](#) and we would be happy to provide that information.

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